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CHAPTER 55

Treasured Gifts

EITHER I AM most naive or I have an awful pile of unmitigated gall, because I kept harassing my fine and wonderful friend, the Mir, with continued questions. Luckily for me, the Mir is a most understanding man and he tolerated my questions. In fact, I sometimes believe he welcomed them.

I recall on this day we were chatting in his sun-living room and I said to him out of the clear blue sky, "Do you have any hermaphrodites in Hunza?"

A puzzled expression appeared on his face and he shook his head and said, "I don't know what you mean. I never heard the word before."

I smiled and said, "Don't let that make you feel too badly because most people, even native born English or Americans in many instances have never heard the word before either."

I started to grope for another word that would

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138 describe what I meant, when I spied the doctor standing close by. So I called him and waved to him to come over, which he did. I then said to him, "Would you explain to the Mir the meaning of the word hermaphrodite."

Now, as I have told you, the doctor was a Pakistani but although young, he was learned, having both his science degree and his medical one. With a flicker of a smile on his lips, he translated the word to the Mir in Urdu.

A glow appeared on the Mir's face and suddenly he broke into a chuckle and then it went on to uproarious laughter. I stood by mystified. Even the good doctor wore an air of puzzlement.

I waited a minute or two for the Mir's laughter to die down and then I said to him, "Tell us the joke, too, so we can join in the laughter. After all, laughter is something that should be shared."

At this he broke out laughing again. So we waited calmly until he cooled down. Then I said, "Now take it easy and tell me just what the joke is."

Containing himself as best he could, he replied, "Why I've got one of those things you mentioned working for me right here in the palace."

Then we all began to laugh. When it was all over, he said, "Strange you would ask about a thing like that. Actually I know of one other one in Hunza. That makes a total of two."

"If you are interested," he went on to say, "the name for hermaphrodite in Burushaski is 'mukhanas' . . . but enough of this!"

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123 After lunch the Mir said, "Come with me! I have something I'd like to show you."

He then led me into the room I've been referring to